

Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Arts

PhD THESIS

Summary

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THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE ATTRITION AMONG
YOUNGSTERS IN SLOVAKIA

Hungarian Linguistics PhD

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there have been more and more publications studying the language use of bilingual Hungarians living in Slovakia (Sándor 2000, Menyhárt 2006, Lanstyák 2006b, 2009; Pintér 2008, Misad 2009). These studies refer to language attrition being in progress or having completed in Slovak – Hungarian relation to some extent, however they do not deal with it in detail. The censuses and sociological studies (pl. Gyurgyík 2006, 2011; Lampl 2008, 2011) can only partially grasp the stratum already having started its language- and identity change. Studying language attriters is becoming more and more urgent both from linguistic and sociological point of view as the census data show significantly growing assimilation of Hungarians in Slovakia.

The aim of my research is to describe fifteen Hungarian language attriters' language use and to point out the features indicating language attrition. In my study I examine disfluency features, interference and code-switching in language attriters' speech production in relation to Hungarian dominant Hungarians living in Slovakia. In addition to this qualitative perspective I examine the relative occurrence of the features as well, as a factor that may help me identify the language decay phenomena.

The thesis is experimental; it is an attempt to study language attriters' Hungarian language. As this subject has not been much studied in relation to Hungarian – Slovak contact before, the aim of my paper is a sort of groundwork too, as it can be considered as a first step in studying language loss in this context.

THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

The study of language attrition is a relatively new area in linguistics. The first studies were published in the early 1980's and by today it has nearly developed into an independent discipline. In my thesis the term „language attrition” is given a broad sense; it includes language shift referring to the community and also language attrition referring to the individual. The subject of my study, language attrition, is defined on the basis of the following criteria:

- non-pathological phenomenon,
- completed within one generation,
- individual,
- affects language structure and language use as well (vö. Köpke 2004).

In addition to the criteria above, language attrition can affect both the first language and the second language of the individual. In my thesis the term refers to the decay of the first language.

The study of language attrition in Slovakian Hungarian context can be considered specific compared to „foreign” literature as it differs from it in some respect. A significant part of „foreign” literature (pl. Schmid 2002, Pallier 2007, Leeuw 2007) studies language attrition in an emigrant context, however the subjects in the present thesis cannot be considered emigrants at all. In addition, the age of the subjects is also different from the usual age of subjects in „foreign” studies. The most important difference is the distinction between the terms „language attrition” and „incomplete acquisition”. In an ideal case language attrition occurs when the speaker's first language has already stabilized in the brain (concerning their age, the speaker is over the „critical period”). In case it occurs earlier it is either incomplete acquisition or language attrition, but in most of the cases the two phenomena occur hand in

hand. In cases like this the features resulting from incomplete acquisition are unable to be distinguished from language attrition without any longitudinal analysis (Montrul 2008: 207–109). In my subjects' case the two phenomena are there in parallel as they acquired Hungarian either as a first language or in parallel with Slovak and they started the elementary school in Slovak.

The above mentioned factors make it difficult to compare the results of my study with those of „foreign” research.

METHODOLOGY QUESTIONS

During data collection I applied three sociolinguistic methods: semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, language use questionnaires and participate observation. I have profoundly analyzed fifteen language attrition interviews. The control group consisted of five Hungarian-dominant university students in Slovakia.

When choosing my subjects, my intention was to have a virtual group on a macro level (not in the sociological sense of the term of course). That is why all Hungarian dominant speakers meet the following criteria:

- all are university students in Slovakia
- they pursued their studies exclusively in Slovak
- their Slovak language proficiency is higher than their Hungarian one according to both their own and their surroundings' opinion
- they acquired Hungarian in a non-institutional way
- they acquired Hungarian as their first language or in parallel with Slovak
- they belong to the same generation (born between 1979 and 1986)

The speakers of the control group were chosen according to the following criteria:

- all are university students in Slovakia: they pursue their studies at the university in Slovak
- they attended Hungarian elementary and secondary school
- both their nationality and mother tongue is Hungarian
- they use Hungarian in their everyday life.

I analyzed 35 minute recordings proportionately. I transcribed the interviews based on Lanstyák (2004) phonematical transcription rules. The resulting 189-page corpus contains 85 29 words altogether.

In 2006 I attempted to analyze speech production interviews together with István Lanstyák. Based on this, a coding guide developed that provided a good basis for coding the transcripts. The coding of the phenomena in the transcripts was done manually in accordance with the guide and also by developing new codes for new phenomena. Based on this, I coded the speech production phenomena (9190 codes), the discursive aids used by the speakers – eg. false starts, repetitions (4826 instances), compensation strategies (4393 instances), interference (2176 instances), code-switches (1039) and mispronunciation (4798 instances).

Organizing the resulting speech production corpus into lists necessary to analyze certain phenomena was conducted with NVIVO 7.0, the statistics were done with SPSS 16.0 software.

For most of the subjects defining their identity is a problem – even those subjects who picked an unambiguous category for the question about their nationality in the questionnaire (eg. Hungarian or Slovak) were related to the other language as well. This dilemma is even intensified by the expectations of their surroundings (expectations of Slovak circle of friends against those of Hungarian grandparents, or sometimes parents).

The speakers use Hungarian most often with their grandparents. Hungarian appears within the family; however its use is not exclusive in any of the cases. In the circle of friends

Slovak is dominant. Hungarian does not belong to the everyday life for the speakers anymore, they do not feel its necessity, and thus, they do not make much effort to practice it. This is backed up by their passive language use as well – they rarely read Hungarian newspapers and they hardly read Hungarian books.

I have divided the speakers into two groups based on their relation to Hungarian and to Hungarianship:

1. *Positive attitude* speakers, who emphasized their emotional relation to Hungarianship as well in their responses in the interviews and questionnaires.
2. *Neutral* attriters, who consider the knowledge of Hungarian culture and language important only because they see some benefit or advantage in them.

A third group can be presumed as well, whose relation to Hungarianship is negative. I call them *alienating attriters*. The speakers not willing to participate in the interviewing, because they intend to break up with Hungarianship in all respect, can be put in this category as well. I can refer to the existence of this category only on the basis of my experience, as in fact, this group of attriters cannot be grabbed at all (see also Sándor Anna 1998).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

I have analyzed the corpus from three aspects: disfluency features, code-switching and other language contact features. I dealt with these aspects in separate sub-chapters. In the chapters I gave an overview of the features occurring in the speakers' utterances and then analyzed their frequency. At the end of the chapters I concluded from the relative occurrence to those features that seemed to be more typical of language decay. I considered the features more typical of language decay, that is, so called strong language decay features, that did not occur in the speech of the control group at all, or their relative occurrence significantly differed from the one in the control group.

The most important conclusions grouped around the aspects of my analysis can be summarized in the following way:

DISFLUENCY FEATURES

In the language attriters' utterances there occurred significantly more disfluency features than in those of the control group.

There was no difference between the two groups in terms of uncertainties. One of the reasons is likely to be methodological; there are relatively few informants. In addition, I found evidence that the language attriters solved their problems resulting from language uncertainty or time factor other than the control group did.

Analyzing some distinct phenomena of uncertainty, there was significant difference only in terms of intra-lexemic pauses – language attriters applied it more often. This implies that they were uncertain about the ending to be attached to the word, that is, grammatical planning caused a problem for them.

Significant difference couldn't be traced; however the discursive function of the fillers was apparent in the attriters' group. Certain speakers applied fillers as a strategy to close the topic quickly and to mark the ellipsis warning the interlocutor of it.

The language attriters mispronounced significantly more than the control group. I further categorized the phenomena during the analysis; replacements, mispronunciation in a narrower sense, hiatus, surplus. In both groups hiatus was the most frequent feature and surplus was the rarest one. The high occurrence of hiatus is caused also by the fact that in

informal spontaneous speech omission is also frequent, and the interviews were conducted also with the aim to establish a casual context.

Reductions, ellipsis and lack of endings occurred most frequently as types of hiatus. Language attriters tended to reduce consonants. In addition, they used such elliptical structures that could not be deduced from the context, interlocutor, or knowledge about the world. Deduction was often made impossible by mispronunciation. The high occurrence of ellipsis and lack of endings shows that the speakers solved the problems coming from the difficulties in lexical access and grammatical forming with the help of these features.

Considering their relative occurrence I regarded the following phenomena as typical in terms of language decay:

- hesitation between the indefinite (or subjective) and the definite (or objective) conjugations
- replacement of verb suffixes
- replacement of adverbial suffixes
- replacement of lexemes
- unusual word order
- lack of assimilation
- lack of grammatical agreement
- reduction of consonants
- ellipse
- lack of articles
- lack of substantive verb in verbal – nominal predicates
- lack of endings
- lexeme insertion
- suffix surplus

CODE-SWITCHING

Language attriters applied code-switching more often than the control group; however there was no significant difference between the two groups in this respect. An explanation for this can be the fact that most attriters were speaking in monolingual mode, that is, they were avoiding code-switching.

The base (matrix language)-keeping code-switches in the corpus were analyzed in respect of the integration of the embedded language elements into the matrix language based on Lanstyák (2005a, 2005b, 2006b). In terms of relative occurrence there was no significant difference between the groups. Language attriters applied Z, B and V type code-switches almost to the same rate. H and X type code-switches only rarely occurred. The main difference between the two groups was the fact that H and X type code-switches occurred as well in the interview with language attriters, furthermore, B type code-switches were less dominant in their speech, as the integration of the embedded language into the matrix language is more problematic for them than for the control group.

Most Z type code-switches occurred due to a communication strategy. These kinds of communication strategies are likely to influence the frequency of certain types of code-switches, mainly causing more frequent Z (in some cases H) type switches.

X type code-switches cannot be as precisely identified as the previous types, since few examples occurred in the corpus. It seems to be worth analyzing this type not from a grammatical point of view but from a semantic one and from the aspect of its function in the utterance. X type code-switches occurred in the interviews with such speakers as well, whose Hungarian proficiency, in my opinion, is relatively good, however only in those registers that the speakers did not have much practice in, or did not have any at all.

Concerning base-keeping code-switches, there were reasonably huge individual differences in both groups, which distorted the results. For example, one speaker in the control group did not use any code-switching at all, whereas another one used more code-switching than some of the attriters. These differences can be attributed also to the speakers' situation or ideology. At the same time, it also implies that code-switching does not imply language attrition on its own.

The embedded language element was rather a word than a longer phrase in the case of both groups. In this respect there was no significant difference.

Base-switch was detected only among attriters – first of all between sentences and clauses. Most code-switches in the corpus were flagged ones. Non-flagged code-switches were dominant mostly when the speakers used embedded language words that were well-known in the context of the conversation topic. There occurred more non-flagged code-switches in the control group; however there was no significant difference.

In most cases the reasons for code-switching were language hiatus and lapse. In addition, citation and specification occurred as well. It is likely that it is the interview situation that caused no more reasons.

To-and-fro code-switching, if it is not regarded as speech mode but as a phenomenon occurring occasionally, can be manifestation of language attrition as well. In cases like this, the embedded language sequences tend to be shorter and more fragmental than in cases of speech mode and they are flagged more often and in more ways.

The following code-switches were regarded as more typical, so called strong code-switches: H and X type, base-changes outside the sentence, inter-sententially and intra-sententially.

OTHER LANGUAGE CONTACT FEATURES

I have defined language contact phenomena on the basis of Lanstyák (2002, 2006). Both situational and occasional contact phenomena were significantly more frequent in the case of language attriters.

The most frequent contact feature in the case of language attriters was consonant reduction; the second most frequent one was Slovakian-like word order, then syntactic and other calques and then morphological loans. In the case of the control group semantic loans and calques were also the most frequent language contact phenomena.

In the case of attriters most interference features occurred on the syntactic and phonetic levels, the fewest features did on the level of morphology. One reason for this can be the fact that some of the attriters did not acquire the language completely, and thus, incomplete acquisition may distort the results. In addition, some features were not quantified, eg. direct loans and Slovakian-like tone, which also distorts the results. In case of the control group most interference features occur on the level of vocabulary and syntax.

I regarded the following language contact phenomena as typical in terms of language decay:

- linguistic fragmentation
- interference related to accommodation
- shortening of double consonants
- shortening of long vowels
- hybrid loans / loanblends
- calques
- loanshifts / semantic loans
- replacement of endings/suffixes
- lack of endings
- semantic shift of morphemes

- ellipse due to Slovak interference
- Slovak-like word order
- syntactic calque
- Slovak-like agreement
- pronominal possessive endings

The results of the present study are likely to be valid for other Hungarian paired contexts. The results can be well-used in the area of language planning and during establishing language revitalization programs. In addition, they can be used in the area of second language acquisition and mother tongue education, since language attriters and non-attriters are two points of a flow, making it possible for the analysis of attrition to catch problems of non-attriters' language proficiency as well. This, in turn, can be an important point of view when writing Hungarian school-books.

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